

ARTICLES

A series of six articles Father Michael wrote "On Being A Christian"

Article One

These are some thoughts on Christian Discipleship. They are ideas that challenge us to be reflective about our faith and its implications for our lives.

"The most difficult mountain to cross is the Threshold" Danish Proverb

Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church during the 1950's and 60's I was under the impression that being a Christian was about attending church. The parish I attended was St. Pius the X. I attended Mass on Sundays and a weekly religion class.

I went to church each week without thought. During the service I gazed at paintings of the Stations of the Cross that adorned the brown brick walls of our sanctuary. I sat on the pew kneelers. I teased my siblings. In the background, I heard the words of the priest.

The notion that being a Christian implied more than regular attendance at Sunday morning Mass did not occur to me until college. Something else had to happen before I began to consider what the Christian life was all about. I had to wake up to life and feel the pull of God. I had had experiences of God, but needed to be able to begin to make sense of those experiences.

The summer after high school I woke up to God's presence in my own personal world. I traveled for a month in Colorado with two friends, Steve and Paul. We traveled in Paul's GTO, sleeping under the stars. As we traveled I saw the grandeur of God's creation in mountains and streambeds. I was in awe of the wonders of creation. As I faced problems I began to be aware of God's protection. I was lonely at times and felt the ache of separation. I began to feel a tug from God. When I walked back into church during college, I had some awareness of spiritual questions.

In his new book, *From Beginning to End*, Robert Fulghum sets out the following proposition:

To be human is to be religious. Every human being asks the elemental religious questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? Where did I come from before birth and what happens after I die? What's right and wrong and how do I know? What is the meaning of life, and how do I give meaning to my life? How do I account for the awesome, mysterious majesty of the universe, and what's my place in the scheme of things?

Being a Christian is not essentially about church going. It is about paying attention to God. Being Christian means acknowledging God's presence in our lives and seeking to live in a way consistent with our understanding of God's desire for us. To know more, we need to move closer to God. We need to begin a personal relationship with God.

Article Two

"The great lesson from the true mystics . . . is that the sacred is in the ordinary . . ." Abraham H. Maslow

To be religious is to pay attention, acknowledge and seek God. This is the task of human life. But, developing such a relationship takes time.

In our twenty five of marriage my wife and I have moved seven times! The challenge of building relationships has been with me my adult life. I believe the skills one acquires in cultivating human relationships can be used in starting work on a relationship with God.

Human relationships begin slowly. We meet, exchange pleasantries, and begin to share a part of our lives with another. We share stories and look for ways in which our lives interconnect. Over time this sharing leads to a deeper relationship. We grow in our relationship to God in a similar fashion. We discover God in the books we read. We hear of God during a conversation. In a workshop someone shows us a new aspect of God. A friend shares a story with us and we experience God in the world around us.

For every person the start of the relationship is different. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, wrote of encountering God while alone at prayer. He tells of finding his heart strangely warmed. The psalmist tells of finding God in a still quiet voice. People speak of finding God in a "mountain top" experience and of hearing the voice of God in a time of deep despair. Relationships do indeed begin in a variety of ways.

One important ingredient in the start of a relationship is openness. When we are busy, preoccupied, or closed in on ourselves, it is harder for us to hear the movement of those around us. Relationships are more likely to begin, and to be nurtured, when we can pay attention. It is the same with a relationship with God. To encounter God it is necessary to find time to be with God. Being with God in prayer, on a walk along a wooded path, or through the reading of a good book, enables us to deepen our relationship.

We come to know God, not only in "big moments" but in many small moments as well. Like falling in love, knowing God does not happen overnight. Like a good relationship, the knowing gets deeper according to the effort one puts into the relationship. Lawrence Kushner, in *God Was in This Place and I did Not Know*, says:

The burning bush was not a miracle. It was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention.

Article Three

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,

And first my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and light you give to us through him."
St. Francis of Assisi-The Canticle of Brother Sun

The art of paying attention to God has been practiced by people the around the world since human beings have wondered at the heavens. Those who have practiced the longest or have given themselves most diligently have been considered saints and the tales of their experiences have given hope and guidance to millions. One such individual was St. Francis of Assisi.

Born in 1181 in the town of Assisi, Italy, Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone was renamed, Francesco, by his father, and St. Francis by the world at large. During his youth his hometown of Assisi was in civil war, so Francis went to fight and was held prisoner until his father ransomed him. Francis became ill with a strange sickness. When his father suggested that he go to war again, Francis fled to the hills taking some of his father's merchant goods with him. Challenged with the theft, Francis returned, gave back the goods he had taken and left his

father's home. Wandering for a time, Francis began paying attention to God and felt called to a new life. He spent the rest of his life nursing victims of leprosy, repairing churches, preaching the Gospel and being in communion with the world around him.

Francis and others who were attracted to his simple way of life established communities of faith grounded in his ideals of order, simplicity and service. The Franciscan way of life continues today in monasteries around the world. While much of his way of life would not appeal to many of us, (he lived in poverty and chastity), the notion that life should be lived in simplicity, in communion with the earth, in service to others and in prayer to God, still has much to commend it. Living simply implies that the material goods of the earth are to be used with care. Living in communion with the earth implies we care for and nurture our environment. Living in service to others implies our lives should be focused outward, on helping to meet basic human needs. And living in prayer to God implies we develop a healthy prayer life. The prayer of St. Francis, found on page 833 of the Prayer Book, reflects this piety.

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;>
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
Not so much to be understood as to understand;
Not so much to be loved as to love;
For it is giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we awaken to eternal life.

In 1225 Francis went on a preaching tour and became ill. His illness continued to worsen throughout the year. On October 4, 1226 Francis died and was buried in a small nearby church. Two years later he was recognized as a saint. Throughout the centuries following his death many people have been inspired by his example. His way of life serves as an example of what it means to live as a Christian in the world. Francis paid attention to God and was called to live a life of simplicity, caring for the earth and for others.

Article Four

"Sin must needs be, but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well."
The Revelations of Divine Love, - Julian of Norwich

With violence and terror in the headlines, people must ask that most difficult of all questions; how can a loving God tolerate such suffering? The life of the 14th century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, is a testament to those who have tried to understand the ways of God and the sufferings of humans. Early in her life Julian asked God for three things: first, that she might understand why Jesus suffered so cruelly; second, that she might understand the purpose of human suffering; and finally that she might understand forgiveness, compassion and the heart's longing for God. At the age of 30 Julian, received a revelation from God about these issues. For the next 20 years Julian strove to comprehend these visions in her writings, known as The Revelations of Divine Love.

Central to her book is a parable about the suffering of humans and God's response. A servant, who loves and is loved by his master, goes to work in the fields. On his way the servant falls in a ravine and is hurt. Being able neither to rise nor to find any comfort, he forgets his master's love for him, and thinks only of his misfortune. Meanwhile, the lord, who knows what has befallen the servant, has two thoughts. The first is of great pity for the hurt that has come to his servant. The second thought is of the joy and bliss for the reward that he intends to

bestow on him, for the servant is not to blame for the condition in which he has fallen. As he lies in the ravine, the servant is as lovable as when he stood before his master. "Therefore", the master says, "because this servant has endured harm for love of me, it is right to reward him with a gift."

Julian understood suffering as a part of life leading to a greater relationship with God. God, Julian proclaimed, does not cause pain but has compassion on the sufferings of all people. She believed that love and joy were God's strongest attributes. God does not blame Christians for their sins, God pities them for their sufferings. God's love and compassion for all creation moves us to want to be with God. For Julian, God is love and joy personified.

He will give us grace to love him and cleave to him. For he held his heavenly treasure with so great love on earth, that he will give more light and solace in heavenly joy, in drawing our hearts from sorrow and darkness.

Julian sought, but never found, a good reason for the existence of pain and suffering. She only found a way of seeing God's love in the midst of pain. In our church calendar we celebrate Julian of Norwich and her work on May 8. Today, seven centuries later Julian's most famous words continue to sustain us. "Sin must needs be, but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well."

Article Five

"Living the truth in your heart without compromise brings kindness into the world."
Anonymous 18th century monk

One way to look deep in the heart of God is to probe the lives of those who have lived close to God. In coming to know these people and their relationship with God, our lives with God will be illuminated. Listen, then, to the life of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton was born in France in 1915. His mother died when he was six and his father followed in death eight years later. Tom spent his late adolescence in London. There, Tom was introduced into a society of wealth, privilege, and questionable morals. During his 18th year Tom "was breaking (his) neck to get everything out of life that you think you can get out of it when you are eighteen." He traveled extensively, and began college with a taste for excitement and trouble.

In 1933 Tom, experienced the suicide of a friend, got a young woman "in trouble," and was confronted by his guardian about his lifestyle. Tom moved to America and spent six years struggling with his life. He tried many ways of life and ultimately entered a Trappist monastery. By the time Thomas began his life as a Trappist he was much changed. He had exhausted his mind and body in the world and lost his way. Tom entered the monastery seeking a new life.

Two years after entering the monastery, Thomas Merton published a best-selling book entitled *The Seven Storied Mountain*. Thomas' life would never be the same. Although secluded in a monastery Thomas was sought after as a man of wisdom regarding the role of religion in life. The book is a biography of his life as a rakish young man. It is the story of his conversion to Christianity. It is the story of his journey toward God.

The story of Thomas Merton's journey to God sold well because it mirrors our own story. Like Merton, we have often felt lost and alone in a world that is strange and dangerous. We have known loss, we have experienced shame and doubt and failure. In our most enlightened moments we can see that the "earthly delights" of this world do not sustain a lifetime. The answer Merton found was to give himself to God. On entering the Monastery a priest asked him, "Do you really want to be a Trappist?" Thomas' answer was, "I want to give God everything."

The challenge for our lives is to discover how we can turn to God when we live such extraordinarily complicated lives. This task is difficult for us as it was for Thomas. We have made commitments to families and jobs in ways that are complicating. We are called, just as Thomas Merton was, to give ourselves to the service of God. The good news is that God is waiting. As we frame our lives in service to God we will be giving everything to God.